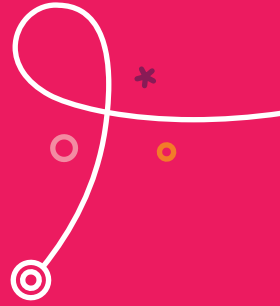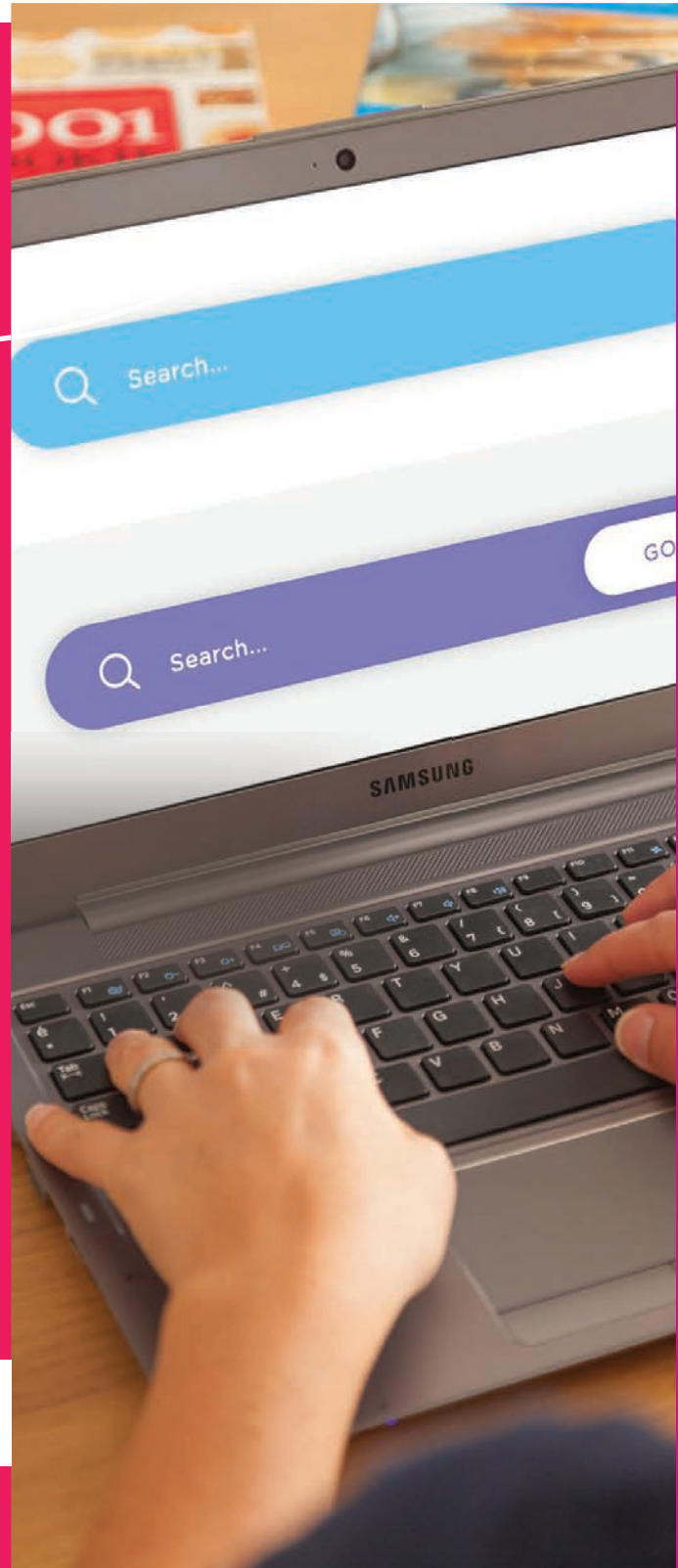Mindtree

A Larsen & Toubro Group Company

Six tips to improve product search and increase conversion rate for your eCommerce business

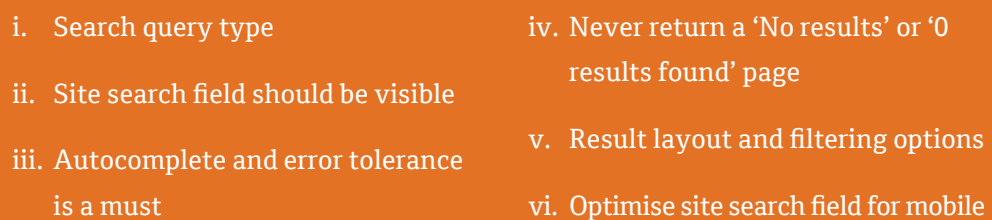**A Mindtree POV / Mar 2021**

Welcome to possible

If I can't find it, I can't buy it, right? If you are in a store and can't find a product, you would then look for help from the sales staff. However, if no one were to help, you would probably walkout.

Similarly, in an e-commerce site, the search feature plays a key role to help and guide you. If the search fails, then you are likely to lose your customer to the competition.

According to Econsultancy, 30% of customers use the site search feature, which accounts for up to 14% of the revenue. A large study performed by Baymard Institute on the top 60 e-commerce sites in late 2019 showed some surprising statistics:

- 60% of sites are unable to return all the results for product type synonym, and they require the customer to use the same term. For example, 'blow dryer' might return 10 results, but 'hair dryer' returns 100 products in the search result.

- 27% of sites will not return results if you misspell a single character in the search text. For example, type 'iPhnoe' instead of 'iPhone' in the search, and you might not get any result.

- 32% of sites do not support symbols and abbreviations. Therefore, the search result will vary. For example, type the word 'TV 32 inch' instead of 'TV 32 in', and the search will return different results.

- 46% of sites do not support thematic search queries such as 'living room sofa' or 'spring coat' or 'winter jackets' instead of sofa, coat & jackets.

Let's address some of the main problems with site search and the best practices with reference snapshots from other e-commerce websites to overcome these issues.

i. Search query type

ii. Site search field should be visible

iii. Autocomplete and error tolerance is a must

iv. Never return a 'No results' or '0 results found' page

v. Result layout and filtering options

vi. Optimise site search field for mobile

1. Search Query Types

This is the backbone of onsite search. A good search engine experience is fully dependent on how well the search queries have been categorised. Some of the commonly used search query types are:

a. Exact product, product type, feature type, thematic type and natural language search.

b. Some complex query types are difficult to handle from the search engine perspective. This includes symptom search query, relational search, compatibility search and others.

Now, how do we make sure we have covered the wider scope of search query types to provide the best search experience to customers? Here are some of the best practices to start with, which can eventually be improvised upon in order to improve the customer experience.

i. Ability to allow search for a product name, product id, or a product category, which should be straightforward and easy to handle

ii. Feature search allows flexibility to find products with feature queries.

iii. Thematic and slang searches are tricky to handle and may not align with the actual term used by the site's search engine but are necessary.

iv. Non-product search is another important feature commonly used by customers to save time and avoid contacting customer support service.

Example 1: Amazon does a good job at allowing exact keyword search by product id or model numbers.

Example 2: Curry's feature search allows the flexibility to find products with feature queries such as search query '28 litre microwave' instead of 'microwave' or '52-inch Samsung TV' instead of 'Samsung TV'.
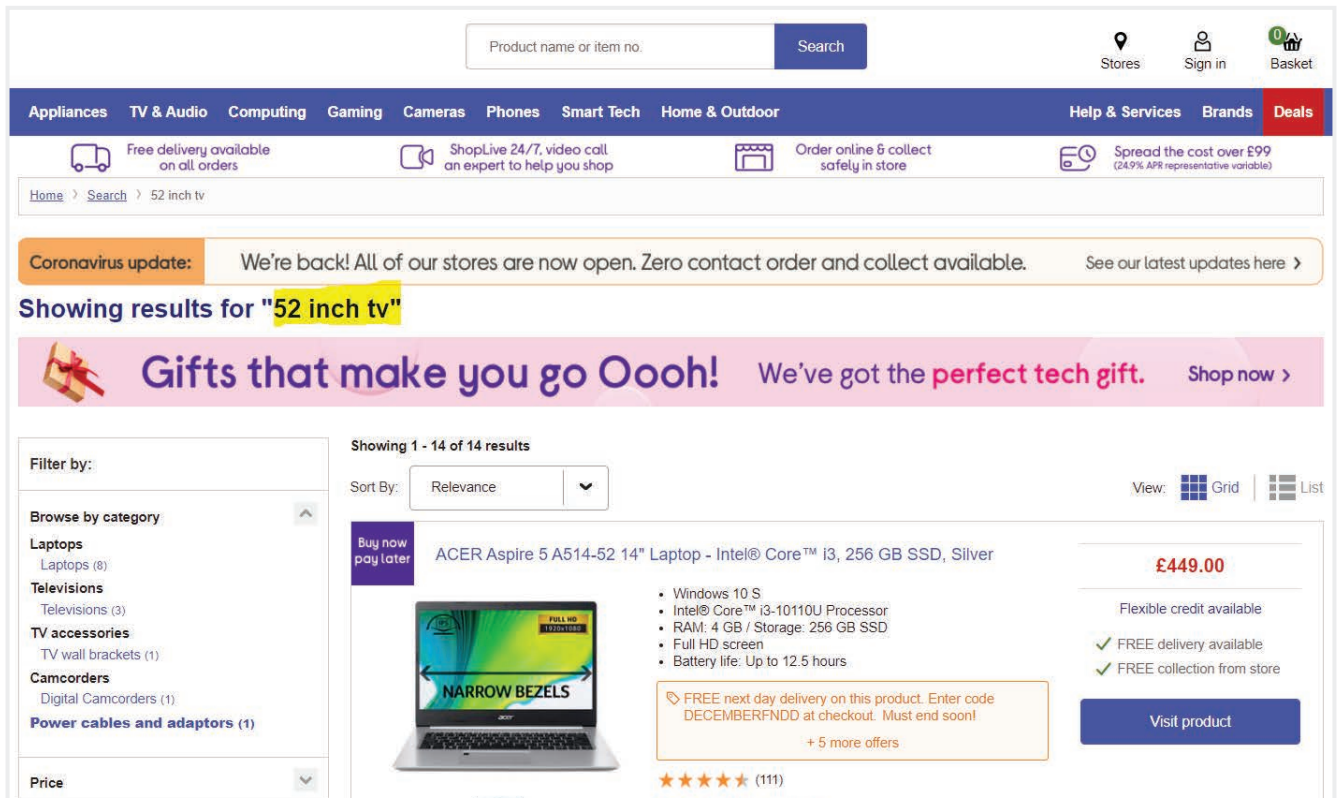

Example 3: IKEA is a good example for 'Thematic' search since it allows customers to further narrow down the search result based on various filters such as price, category, customer ratings, etc.
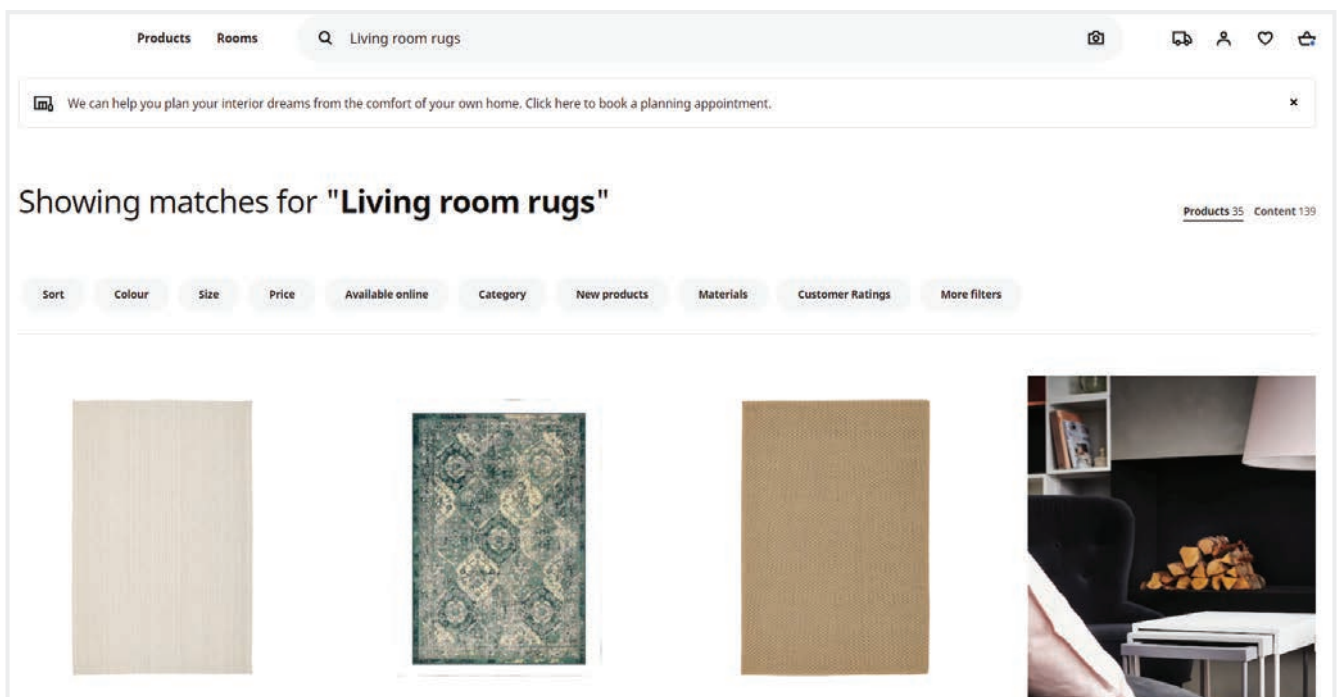

Example 4: Amazon has set the bar too high when it comes to site search capabilities. Here is another example of slang search. When you search for 'shades' it automatically maps it to sunglasses in the result set.
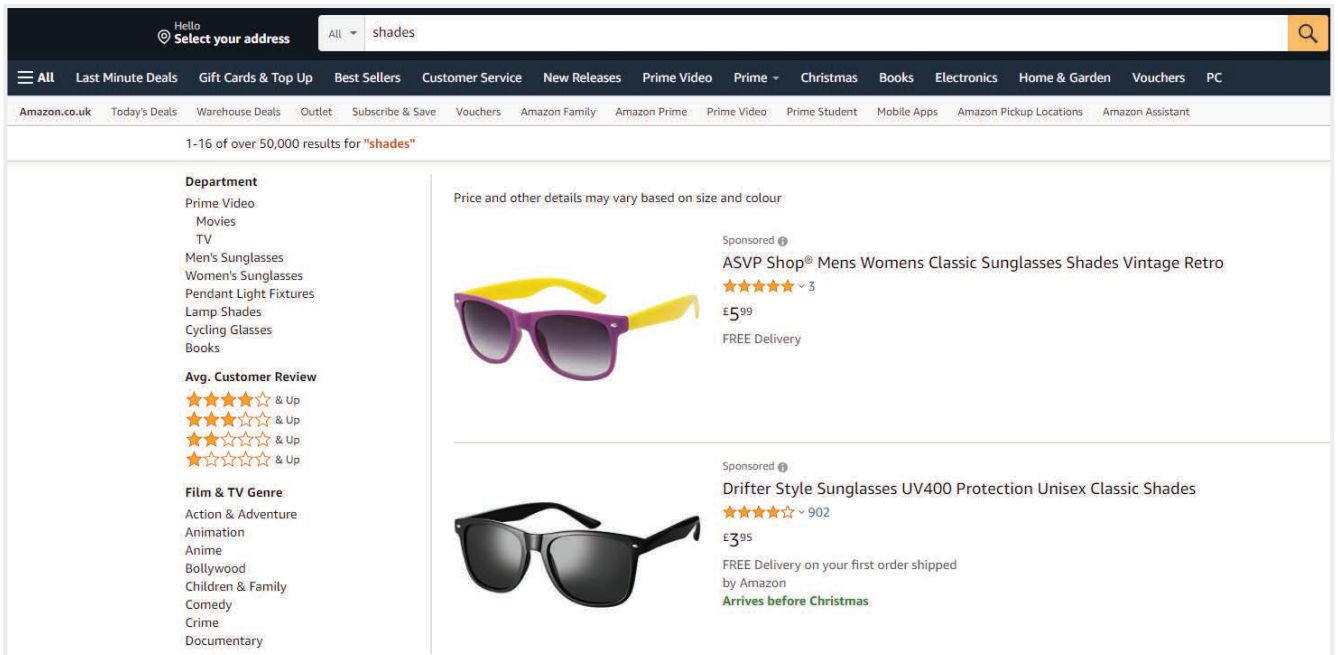
Example 5: Next covers a few non-product search queries very well. If a customer searches for 'return policy,' it redirects them to the terms & conditions page. However, other keywords like 'change password' still redirect to the no results page.
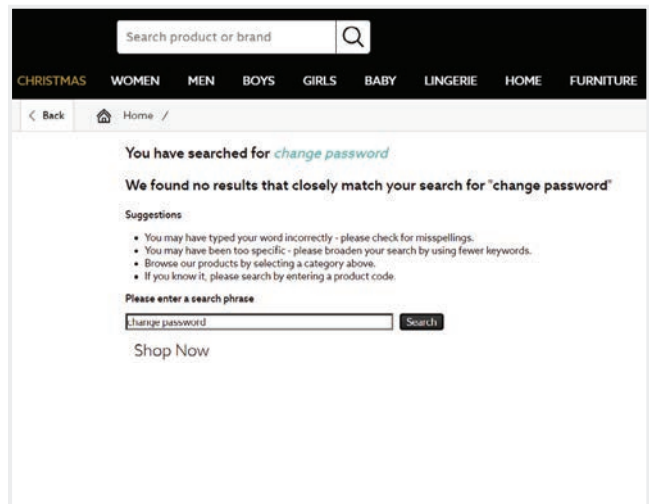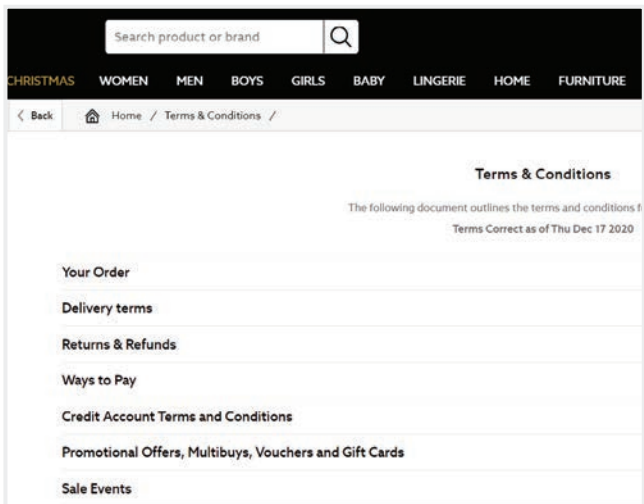
So there needs to be a consistency in implementing these features and avoid confusions for the end customer.

2. Site search field should be visible

We hear customers complaining and overlooking the search field many times saying:

a. We can't find the 'search field',

b. It's very light,

c. I had to look for it multiple times

As a best practice, try and make sure the search field is:

i.   Prominent and visible, especially on the home page.

ii. Placed at the exact same position across the entire website.

Here are some examples, ranging from 'invisible' search field to 'highly dominant' search field across various e-commerce websites, and how they affect usage on the website.

Example 1: Fitbit.com doesn't have a search field on the home page. This means that the customer must navigate through various category pages to find the relevant product.
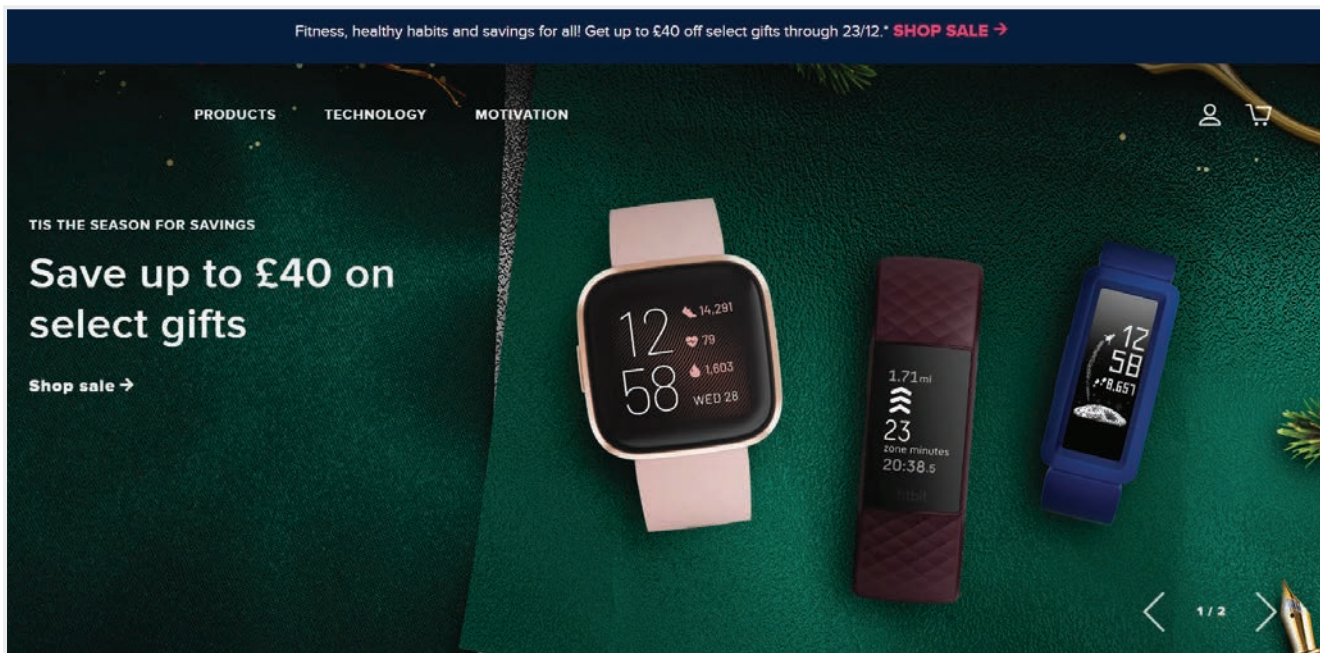

Example 2: Apple has an almost invisible search field behind a magnifying glass icon. The only reason one can find it is because of its position i.e. the upper right corner of the page, where the customer expects it to be on the website.

Example 3: Adidas has a very small search field on the upper right side of the page. In addition, the placement of the search field is in alignment with the navigation tool bar, which makes it easy to find. In case customers are keen to use the site search feature, they can find it easily.
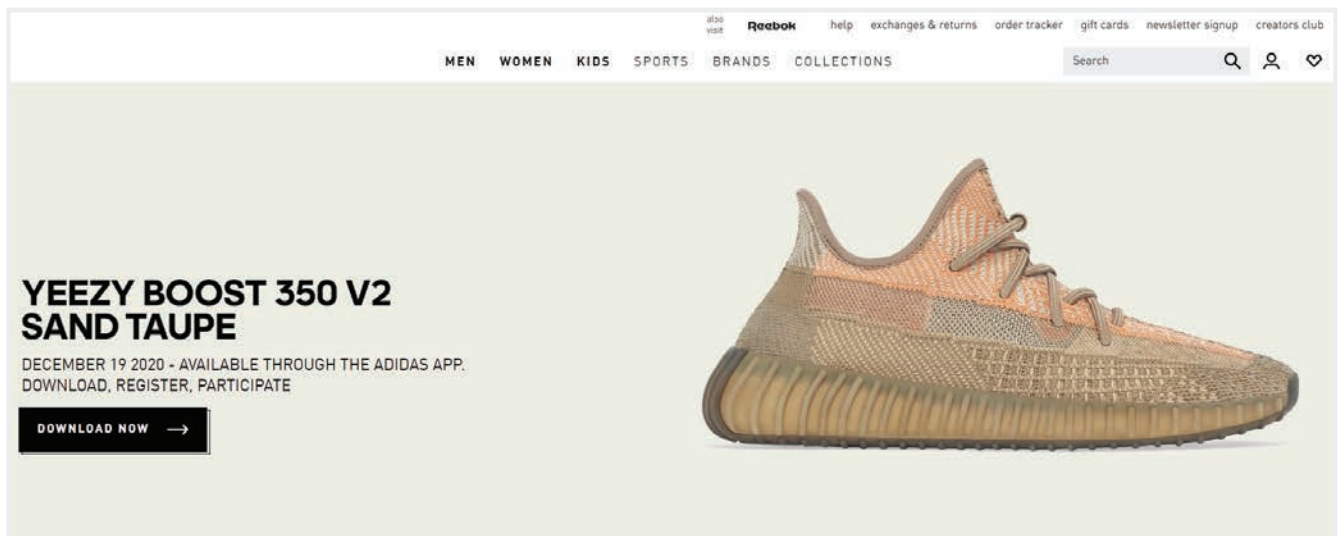
Example 4: Wayfair gives enough visibility to the search field, allowing the customer to find and use it. Moreover, they achieved this simply by a combination of position (centre), contrast (with grey border & magnifying glass icon inside the search box) for easy findability and appropriate field size.
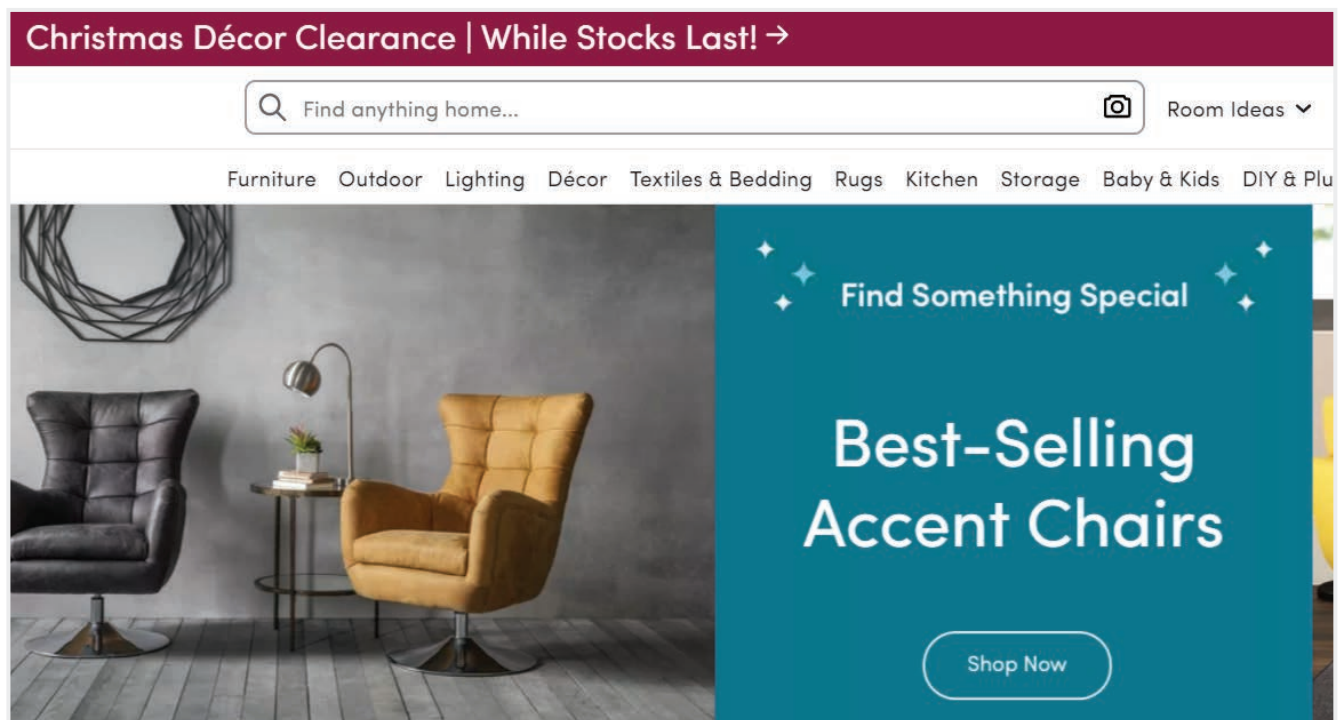
Example 5: At Amazon, the combination of position, contrast and field size makes the search field very dominant. It encourages customers to use the search field as a preferred option to find relevant products rather than navigating through various category/subcategory pages to the product details page.
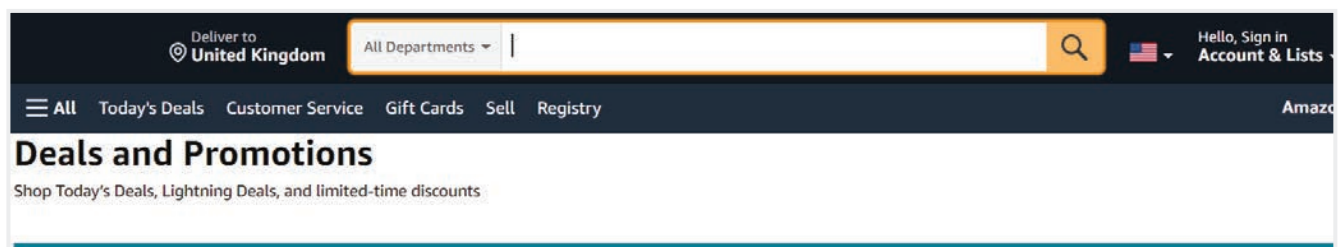
3. Autocomplete and error tolerance is a must

Autocomplete suggestions have become very popular in more than 90% of e-commerce websites in the last five years or so. Some of the key frustrations around autocomplete are:

a. Very long list of suggestions to scroll through to find the right one.

b. Customer can see suggestions overlay but cannot select one of the suggestions to automatically copy it in the search field and continue the search.

c. If customer misspells a character, they might not get any result or different result than what they are looking for in the first place.

As a best practice, here are some of the key considerations to make sure autocomplete suggestions are apt, along with snapshot/examples from other e-commerce sites.

i. Limit the total number of suggestions to avoid scrolling

ii. Autocomplete scope suggestions for easy findability

iii. Dimmed page background to focus on the auto-suggestion dropdown

iv. Highlight active suggestions in bold font and enable the hand cursor to scroll through the options and copy it into the search field automatically

v. Map misspelt or obvious spelling errors with appropriate autosuggestions to help the customer continue the search without revising the query

Example 1: Below is a screenshot from wayfair, it limits auto-suggest to the top nine suggestions only to avoid scrolling which helps the customer narrow down the search quickly and proceed.
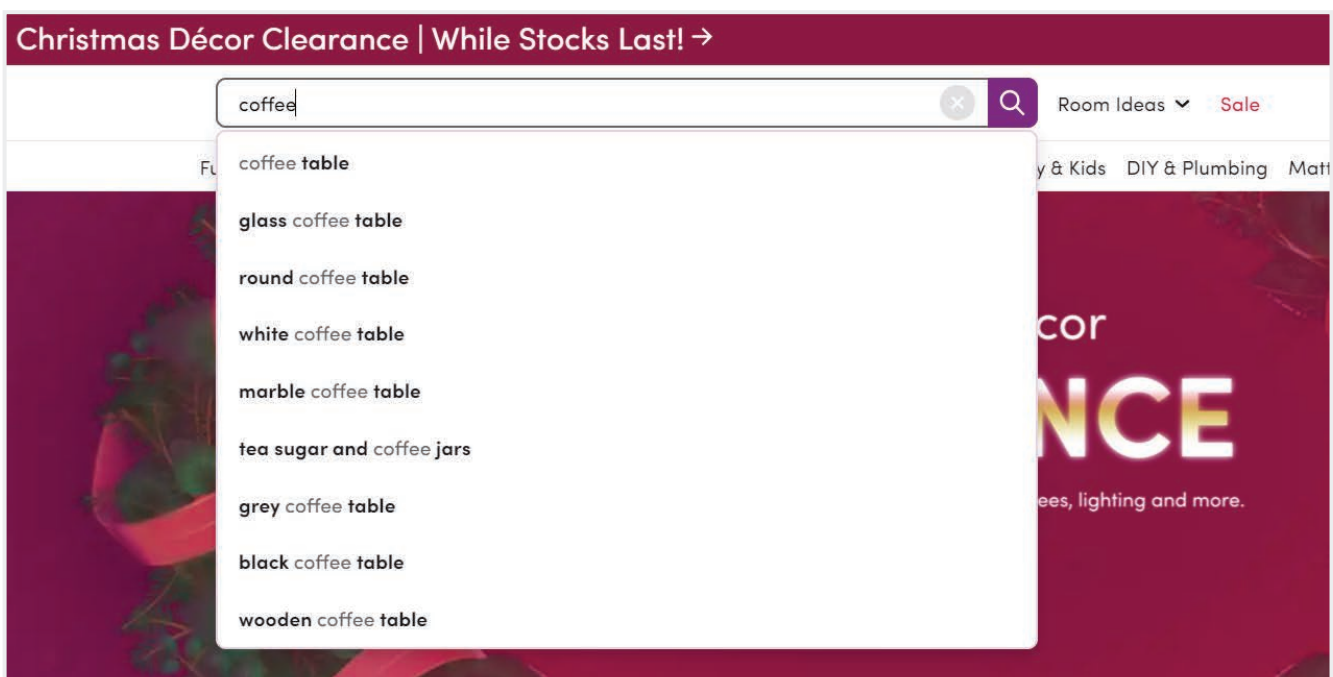
Example 2: The HomeDepot has improved search autosuggest by providing scope suggestions such as if you type 'refrigerator' in the search field it gives you an option to narrow down your search one level deeper such as 'French door refrigerator' or 'in top freezer refrigerator'.
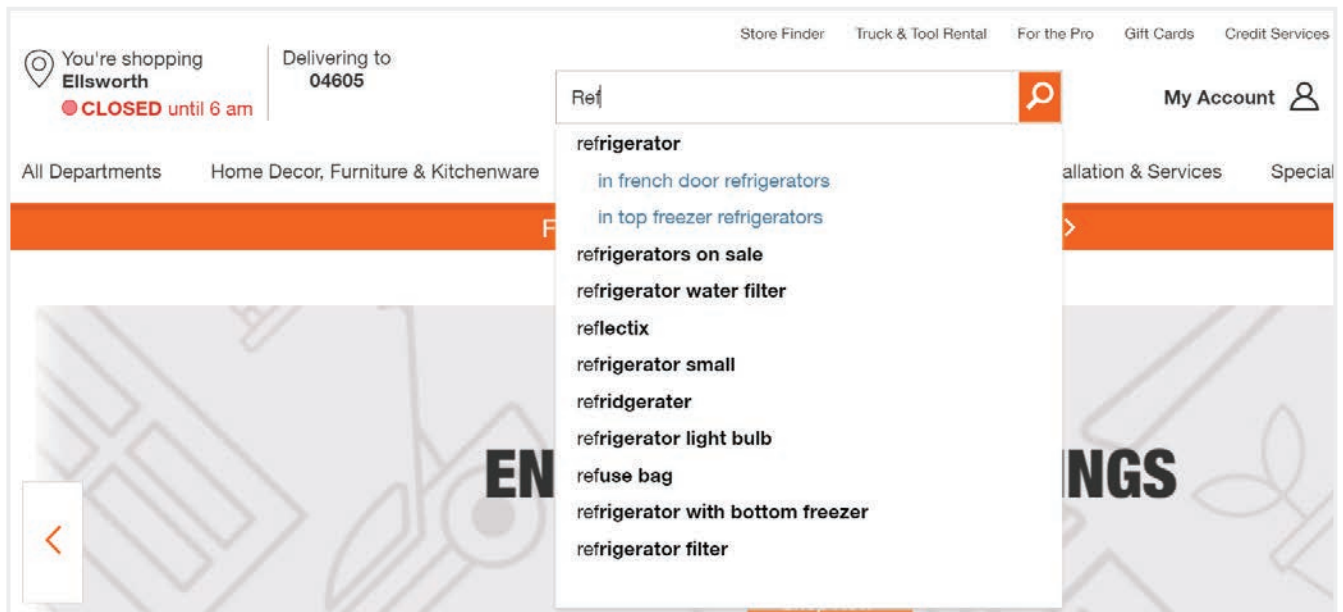

Example 3: By dimming the background at Target, it allows customers to focus on the auto-suggestion dropdown and follow the suggestions.
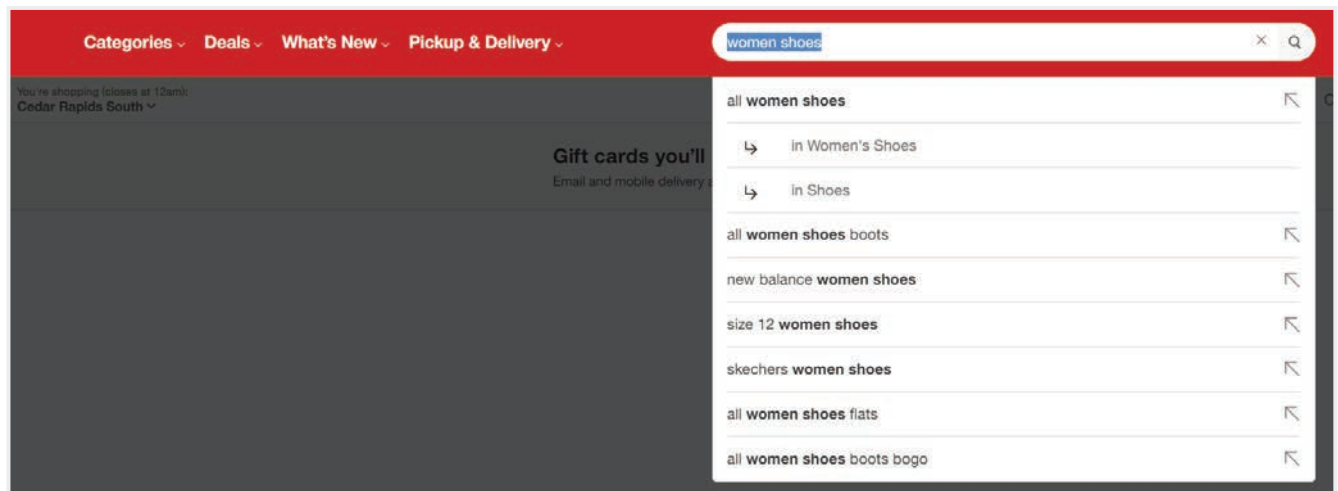
Example 4: Amazon highlights active suggestions in bold font. It also enables the hand cursor to scroll through various suggestions and copy it into the search field automatically.
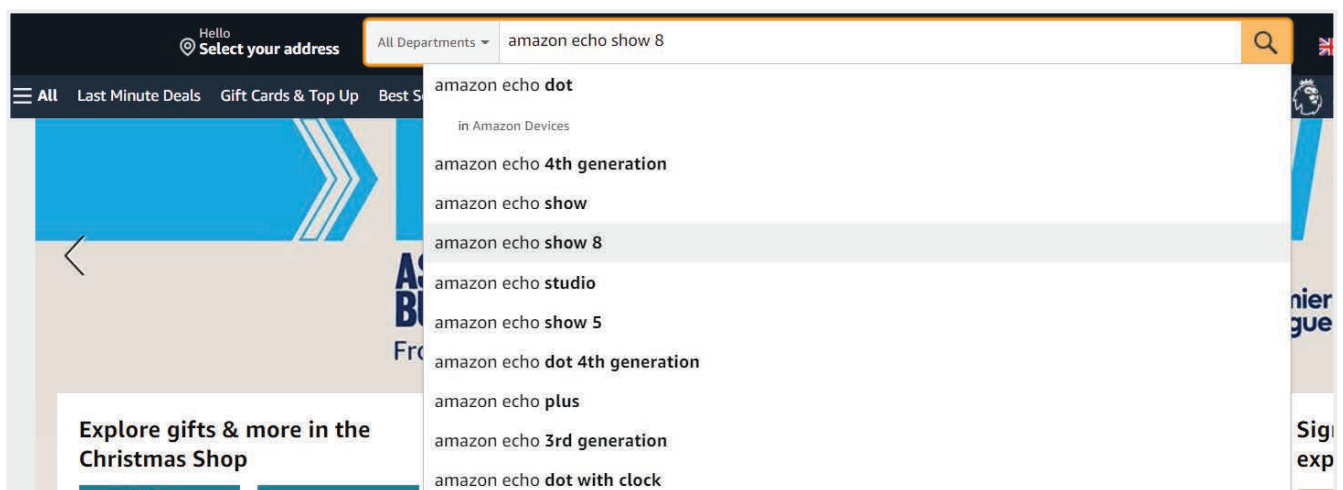
Example 5: In the below screenshot from Asos, the spelling of 'scarf' is misspelt as 'scafr'. However, the autosuggestions are appropriate and correctly mapped to the actual query 'scarf'. It is very helpful and makes it convenient for the customer to find what they are looking for in the first place.
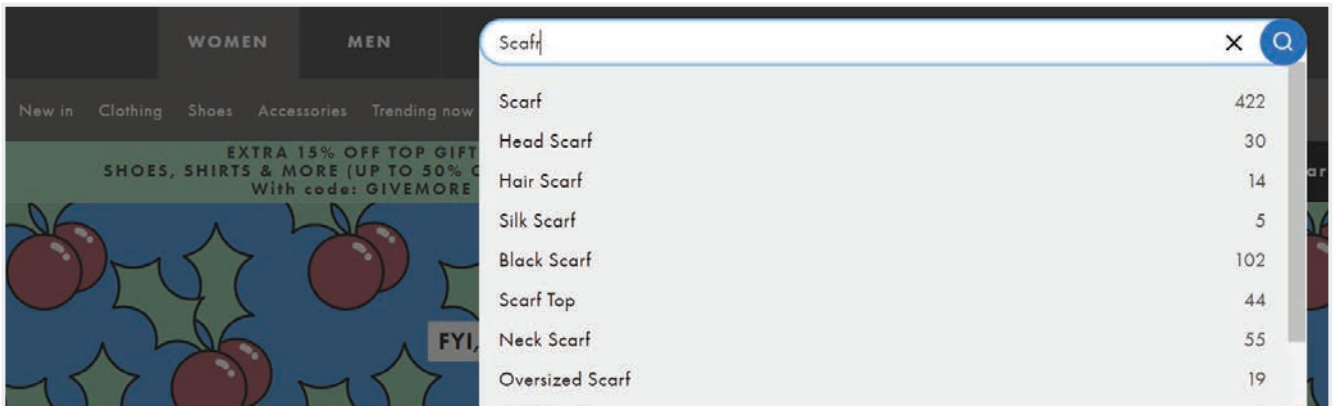
4. Never return a 'No results or 0 results found' page

With a no results page, the customer has two options-

a. Either to come up with a new product search term or strategy such as 'try a synonym, other keyword or navigate through various categories,'

b. Simply give up and abandon the site

Realistically, it is not possible for even the best search engines to always return results for every keyword search.

Here are a few suggestions to consider:

i. Provide alternate queries or keyword suggestions to help the customer navigate

ii. Recommendations based on browsing history or past purchases

iii. Auto switch search scope to the best match user query

iv. Link to external ads for product categories that you don't sell on your website

Example 1: In the below screenshot from Etsy, it shows alternate keyword options on a no results page to help the customer navigate to the right product that they are looking for on the website.
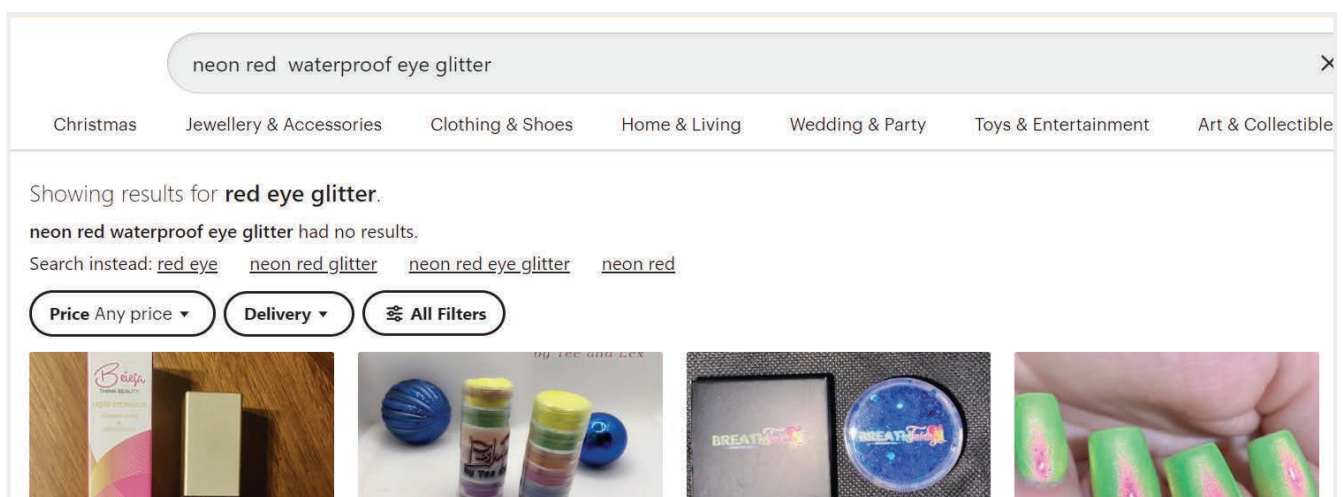
Example 2: Next give various options as nearest matches on a '0 results page' with recommendations based on customer browsing history and past purchases.
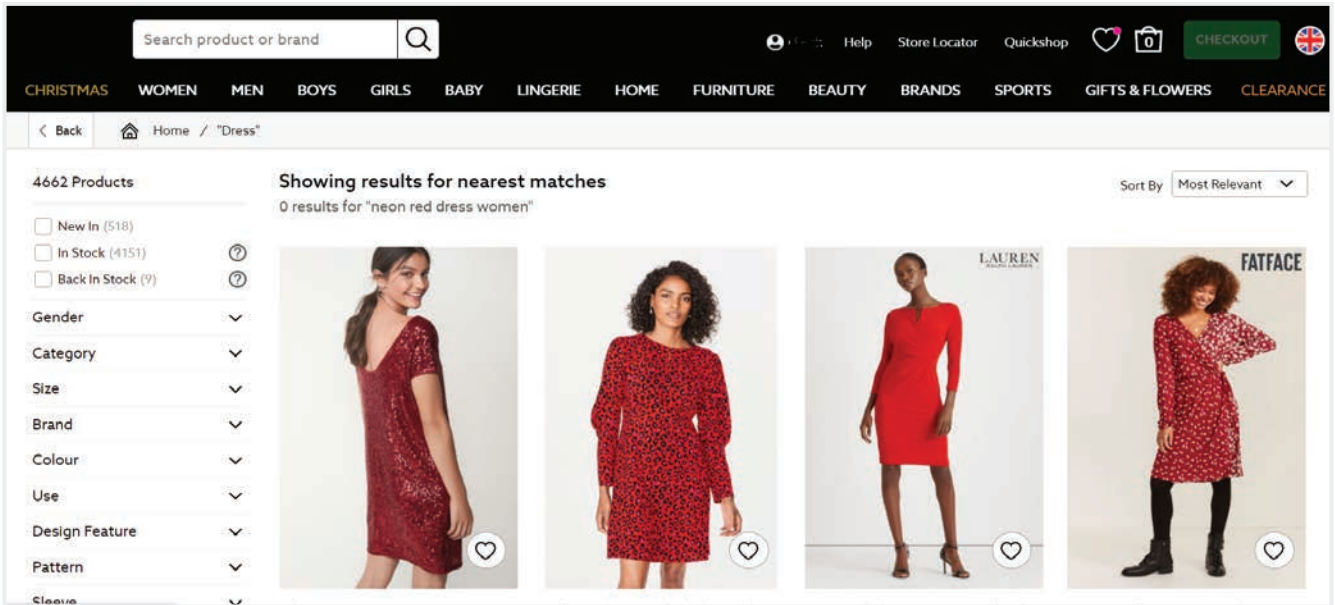
Example 3: Amazon is a good example of an auto switch search scope. In the first screenshot below – the customer types a book name in the search field under the 'Electronics & Photo' department. When the request is submitted, it automatically updates the search scope to 'All' department which improves the possibility to find the right results for the search query.
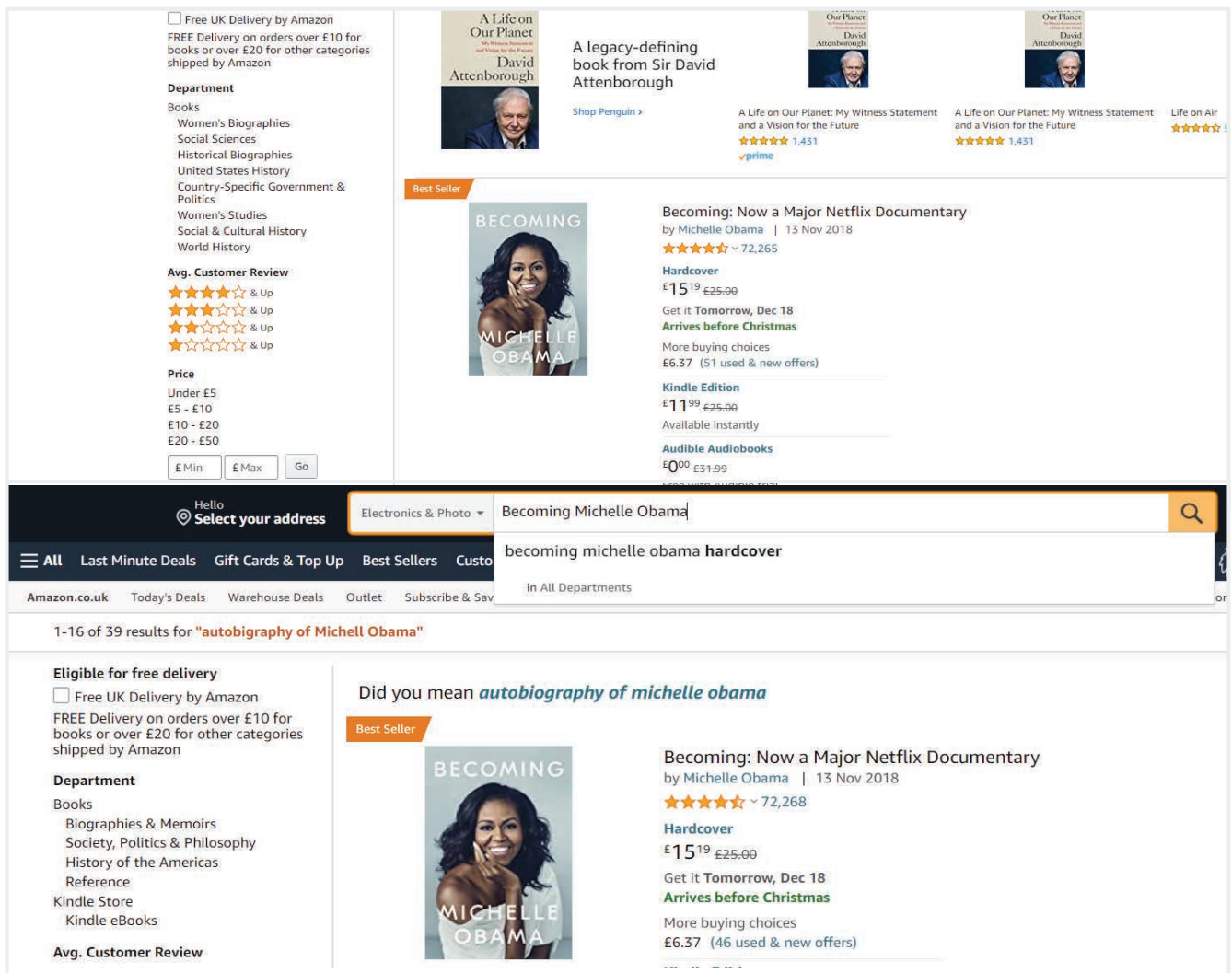
Example 4: Argos has set a very good example of showing 'Ad Links' to other websites instead of 'no results page' for products they don't sell on their website. This is a profitable strategy; even though Argos doesn't sell a product, they are able to make profits with these 'ad links'.
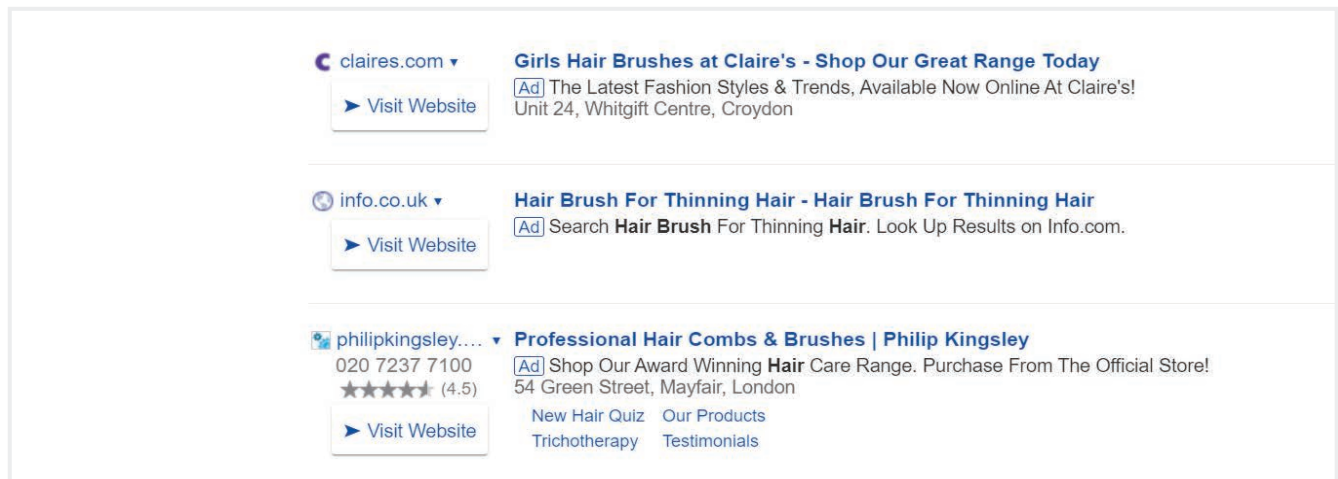
5. Result layout and filtering options

One of the most important elements pertains to efficiently displaying the search results i.e. How to decide on when to use a list view or grid view on the results page. Secondly, how to traverse through the results easily.

Some of the major pain points are:

a. Understanding the relevance of why a product is in the results page

b. Ability to filter results is inefficient

c. Not able to save filter selections on the search results page

As a best practice, here are what other e-commerce websites are doing today.

i. Display a contextual search snippet i.e. highlight the search text in each product of the search result for the customer's understanding

ii. Auto switch layout from the list to grid view and vice versa based on what suits the result type best to showcase product information.

iii. Add dynamic filters based on search query type to allow efficient filtering of products

Example 1: Walmart highlights the search keyword/ query text in each of the result items so the customer can relate to it and understand why it's part of the search result.
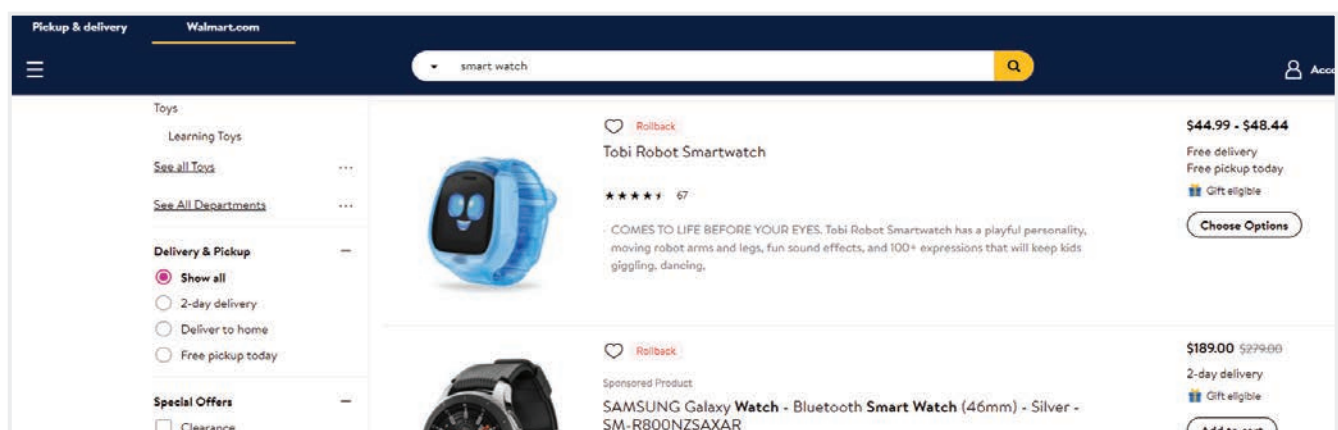
Example 2: Amazon sets another good example on when to switch the page layout based on the search query type.

The first screenshot below is for 'running shoes', and the results page is in grid view to accommodate more products per page. Whereas the second screenshot – is for 'Led TV', and the view automatically switched to list view. This is to improve clarity and make sure the customer can find all relevant information for each TV on the results page properly.
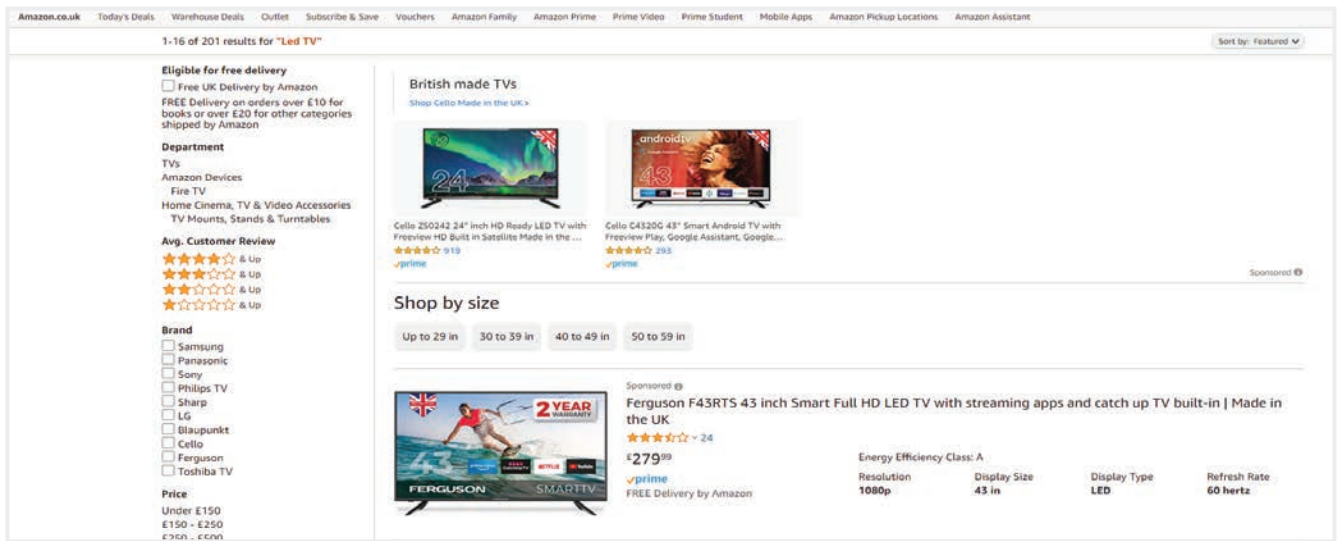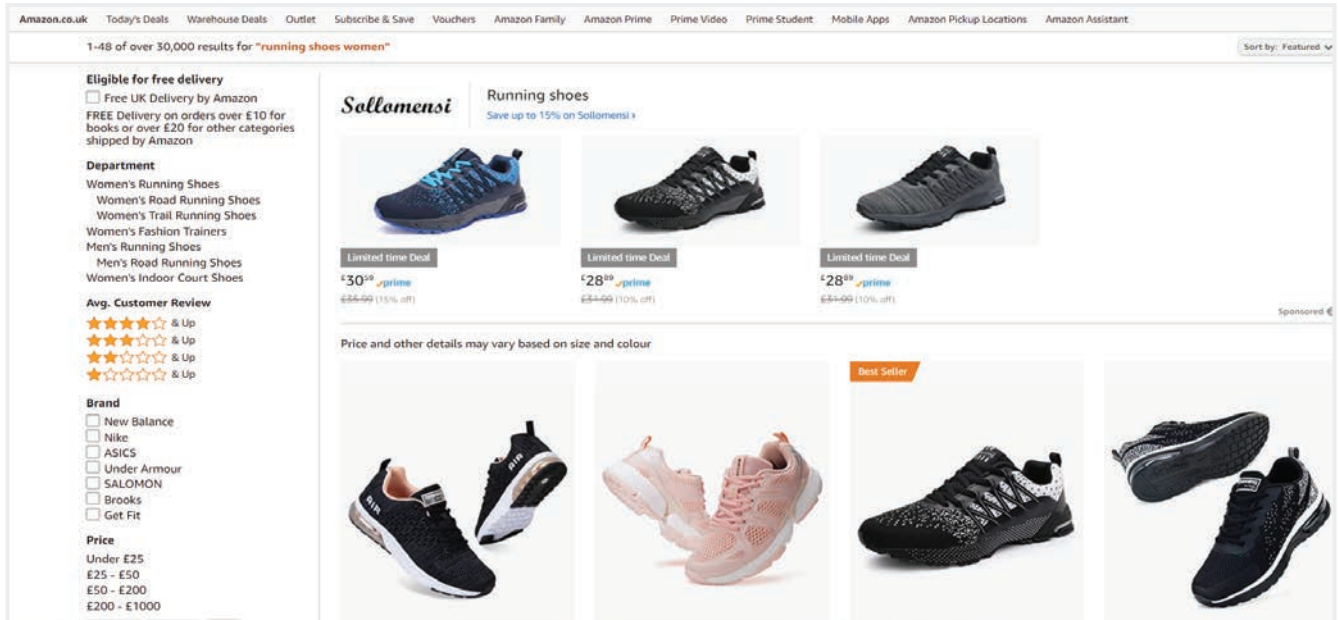
Example 3: Asos is a very good example of facetted search. It provides dynamic filters based on search query type and helps the customer narrow down the result to one product they want to purchase.
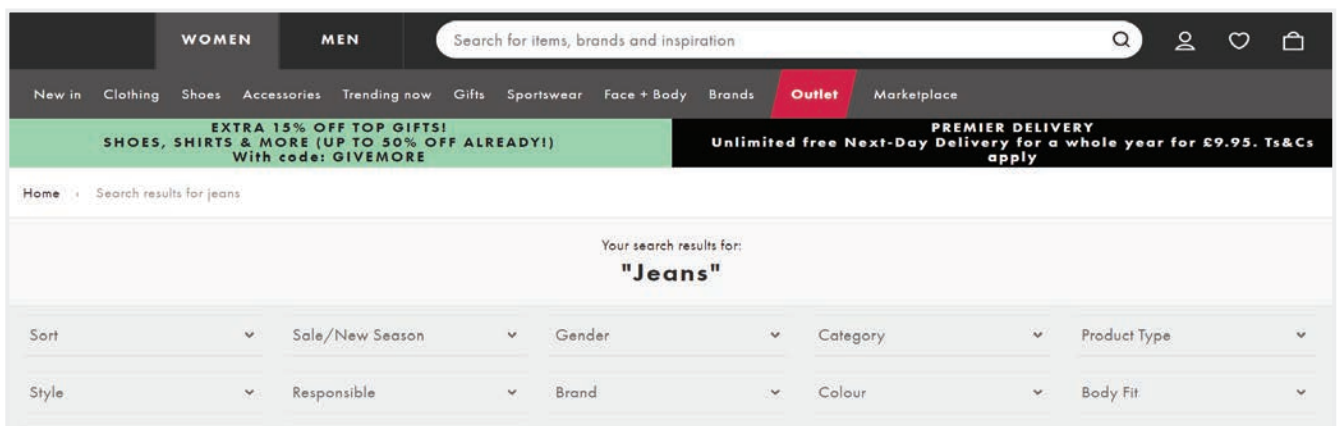
6 Optimise site search field for mobile

On mobile, the search field is one of the most frequently used features. Almost 60% of customers look for the search field on the home page to start the product search.

Some key issues customers face on the mobile are:

a. Unable to locate search field (it's hidden under Menu tab)

b. Insufficient contract between search filed and surrounding elements

c. Search field submit button missing

In order to overcome these issues, here are a few simple best practices to make the search field easily available to the customer.

i. Display the search field in the top header section for easy accessibility than hiding it under the 'Menu' tab to avoid confusion

ii. Visible contrast and clear border on the search field gives a cue that there is a field present

Example 1: Amazon mobile site snapshot below is a very good example for all three points mentioned above i.e. search field in top header section with clear contrast and a yellow submit button. This helps the customer find the search field easily and use it.
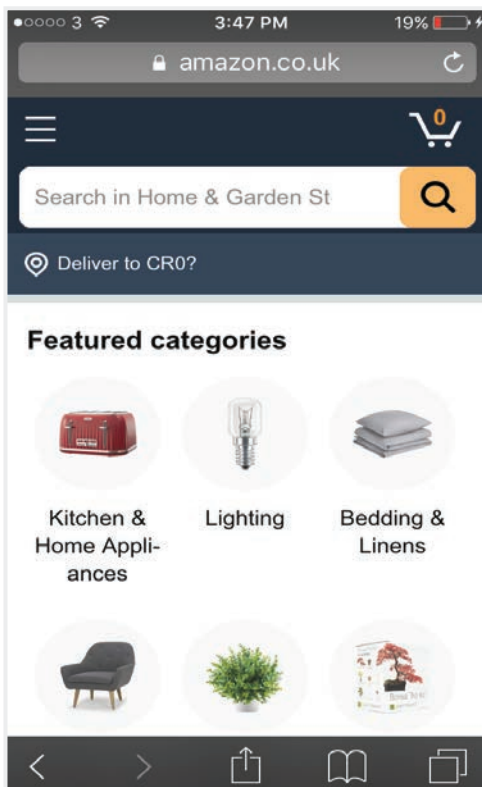
Example 2: A snapshot from the Target mobile site below is another good example of how the search field is surrounded by a contrast background and it stands out to help the customer find the search field easily.
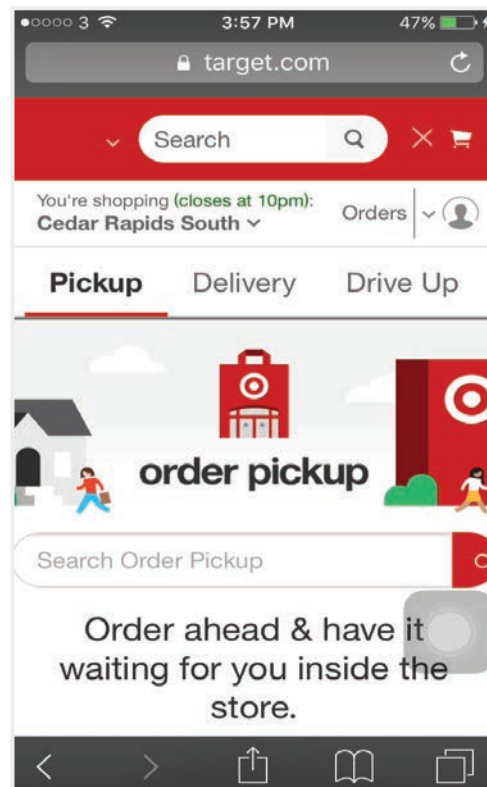
This translates to the fact that designing on-site search with enough visual prominence, contrast, and submit button will guide customers to use on-site search and reduce friction in the first step of product exploration.Some key issues customers face on the mobile are:

So, what are some of the best practices with respect to site search? Let us narrow it down to a couple of 'must have' among all the examples discussed above.

1. Visible and prominent search field on the website

2. Fully functional autosuggestion with limited suggestions to avoid confusion

3. Manage 'No results page' properly so that the customer doesn't abandon your site

We hope this article gives you good ideas to improve your onsite search. To start with, you can pick any one of these three ideas and test it out to see if it helps you improve your conversion rate.

Amrita Singh

Principal Consultant

Amrita Singh has over 13 years of domain expertise across various aspects of Retail, CPG and the Manufacturing industry, with strong experience in eCommerce. She is passionate about providing solutions that delight customers by solving their pain points. Amrita also has a deep understanding of strategic and functional needs of the omnichannel commerce industry.

About Mindtree